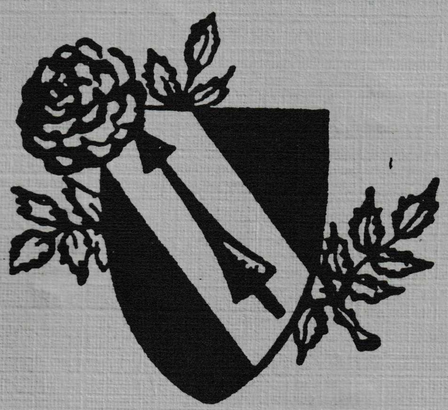
The Story of

William Shakespeare's

The Merchant of Venice.

by Marchette Chute*



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The Story of THE MERCHANT OF VENICE

ANTONIO, the merchant of Venice, is in a melancholy mood. His friends Salarino and Solanio are trying to jolly him out of it by ascribing his sadness to worry about his many ships at sea, or, if not that, then to being in love. When Antonio denies that either is the case, they conclude that he is sad because it is his nature to be so. They are joined briefly by two other young gentlemen, Lorenzo and the irrepressible Gratiano. With them is Bassanio, Antonio's kinsman and friend, who alone remains with Antonio to discuss a serious financial matter. Bassanio has met and fallen in love with a beautiful and wealthy young lady named Portia, but he does not have the means to present himself properly as a suitor at her hospitable estate of Belmont. Antonio cannot at the moment supply the needed money, but he will gladly borrow it to help his friend.

Portia is a little restive under the conditions imposed on her in her father's will, which detail the only manner in which her marriage may be arranged. Nerissa, her companion and waiting-gentlewoman, is confident, however, that the devise of making suitors choose from among three caskets, one of gold, one of silver, and one of lead, was calculated to assure Portia a husband who would love her for creditable reasons. As the two young women laugh together over some of the unsuccessful suitors who are about to leave Belmont, Nerissa recalls a young gentleman whom she remembers as being the most deserving she has seen, and Portia immediately identifies that young gentleman as Bassanio. A servant announces that the Prince of Morocco is arriving to make his choice of the caskets, and the young women hurry to make him welcome.

Bassanio is inquiring of Shylock, a Jewish moneylender, about the possibilities of Antonio's borrowing three thousand ducats for a period of three months. Shylock pretends to be dubious of Antonio's financial soundness, but he sees an opportunity for revenge on the proud merchant. Shylock detests Antonio for his hatred of Jews and his public criticism of Shylock's usurious practices. When Antonio joins them, Shylock upbraids

Antonio for the indignities he, as a Jew, has suffered at Antonio's hands. Antonio is perfectly content to have Shylock his enemy, but Shylock suddenly becomes conciliatory and jestingly proposes that if Antonio does not repay the loan, the forfeit shall be a pound of Antonio's flesh. Bassanio is disturbed by such a suggestion, but Antonio agrees, and they leave to meet at the notary's to draw up the bond.

The Prince of Morocco, a swarthy desert chieftain, is ready to make his choice of the caskets, but Portia warns him of the conditions of the lottery: if he fails to choose the right casket he must swear to drop his courtship entirely. The prince agrees, and Portia conducts him to the temple to take the vow.

Launcelot Gobbo, a clownish servant of Shylock, debates with himself as to whether he will run away from his cruel master. He has just decided he will, when his nearsighted father comes looking for him. Old Gobbo does not recognize his son: Launcelot at first teases the old man by telling him that Launcelot is dead, then relents and asks for his father's blessing. Bassanio is busy giving his serving-men directions for a dinner he is giving that night, when Launcelot and his father interrupt to ask him to take Launcelot on as a servant. Bassanio agrees, Launcelot leaves to quit Shylock's service, and Bassanio hastens his servants on their errands. Gratiano comes to beg Bassanio to take him with him to Belmont. Bassanio consents on condition that Gratiano be on his best behavior. Gratiano soberly promises to be a model of propriety at Belmont, but insists that Bassanio not judge his behavior by what he does at the carnival that night.

As Launcelot says a tearful farewell to Jessica, Shylock's daughter, she gives him a letter to deliver secretly to Lorenzo, who will be dining with Bassanio that evening. After Launcelot goes, she confesses to being ashamed of being her father's child and that she is planning to elope with Lorenzo.

Gratiano, Solanio, Salarino and Lorenzo are making plans for the masking that evening, when Launcelot arrives with Jessica's note to Lorenzo. She has written that she will disguise herself as a page, provide herself with money and jewels, and in the carnival atmosphere steal away with him to be married.

Shylock is going to dine with Bassanio, and he sends Launcelot ahead to announce his coming. With considerable foreboding he leaves Jessica at home alone. Gratiano and Salarino, wearing masks, meet under Jessica's window and are shortly joined there by Lorenzo. Jessica, much embarrassed in her page's clothes, comes to the window and tosses down to Lorenzo a casket full of gold and jewels; then she disappears to join them outside. As they leave, Antonio comes to tell Gratiano that there has been a sudden change in wind and Bassanio's ship is sailing for Belmont immediately. Gratiano leaves happily to go aboard.

Portia conducts the Prince of Morocco to his choice of the caskets. He examines all three, gold, silver and lead, and reads the inscription on each one. Finally he chooses the gold casket; in it he finds a death's head and a scroll detailing his failure, and he leaves disappointed.

Salarino and Solanio are sure that Lorenzo and Jessica did not depart on board Bassanio's ship. Shylock, wailing about the loss of his daughter and his money, had sent a party to search the ship, but it had already sailed. They fear the savagery of Shylock's revenge, if Antonio should not make good his bond, and are reminded of a report that a Venetian merchantman has been wrecked in the English Channel. Salarino describes Antonio's sad and heartwarming parting from Bassanio, and the two decide to try to cheer Antonio up.

Nerissa quickly draws the curtains, as Portia brings another suitor, the Prince of Arragon, to his selection of the caskets. Arragon chooses the silver casket; it contains a fool's head. Arragon leaves, as a servant brings word that a young Venetian is arriving, and Nerissa prays that he will turn out to be Bassanio.

Salarnio and Solanio have heard that one of Antonio's ships has been wrecked. Shylock sees them and accuses them of abetting his daughter's elopement. When they ask if he knows of Antonio's misfortune, Shylock flies into a rage, swearing to exact the pound of flesh: it will avenge Antonio's insults and injuries to him

and his people. A servant summons Salarino and Solanio to Antonio's house, as Tubal, another Jew, brings Shylock news of Jessica. He alternately tortures Shylock with rumors of Jessica's extravagance and delights him with reports of Antonio's losses. Knowing Antonio to be bankrupt, Shylock sends Tubal to make immediate arrangements for an arresting officer, although the expiration of Antonio's bond is two weeks away.

Portia tries to persuade Bassanio to delay his choice of the caskets, but Bassanio is anxious to proceed. Portia calls for a song while he chooses. Bassanio reasons that outward appearances are often deceiving, and he chooses the lead casket. It contains Portia's portrait and a scroll telling him to claim his lady with a kiss. He does so, and to seal their troth Portia gives him a ring which she enjoins him never to lose or give away.

Their happiness is enhanced by Gratiano's announcement that he and Nerissa have fallen in love and wish to be married at the same time they are. Lorenzo and Jessica and Salarino arrive unexpectedly, the latter with a letter to Bassanio. In it Antonio tells of his forfeiture of the bond and pleads with Basssanio to come to see him at his trial. Portia speeds him on his way, giving Bassanio enough gold to pay the debt twenty times over, if it will free his friend.

Antonio, in the custody of the gaoler, has sought out Shylock to plead with him for leniency, but Shylock is adamant. Salarino is sure the Duke of Venice will not allow enforcement of the bond, but Antonio insists the law must be upheld. Antonio returns to the gaol, hoping only that Bassanio will come.

Portia is leaving Belmont to the care of Lorenzo and Jessica, saying that she will remain in seclusion in a nearby cloister until Bassanio's return. As soon as they depart, however, Portia immediately dispatches one of her servants to her kinsman and lawyer, Doctor Bellario, with a request for advice and some men's court robes, and she tells Nerissa that they are going to disguise themselves as young men and attend the trial.

Launcelot jokes with Jessica, saying that her only hope of salvation lies in having married a Christian, until Lorenzo joins them and sends Launcelot in to order supper served. As they start into the house, they comment on what a fine wife Portia will be to Bassanio. Jessica assures Lorenzo that he has one just as good.

The Duke and the magnificos of Venice have met to hear the trial of Antonio. The Duke urges Shylock to forgive part of the debt, but Shylock demands the penalty specified, a pound of Antonio's flesh. Bassanio also tries to plead with Shylock, but Antonio stops him, saying nothing can soften the hardness of a Jew's heart, and Shylock avidly calls for judgment.

The Duke states that he can dismiss the court unless Bellario, whom he has sent for to try the case, arrives. Nerissa is announced and enters dressed as a lawyer's clerk. She presents a letter to the Duke in which Bellario pleads illness but recommends a young doctor of law whom he has sent in his place. Portia enters, disguised as the doctor of law, and is accepted to try the case.

As the two litigants stand forth, Portia declares that Shylock must be merciful. When Shylock demands why he must, Portia protests that mercy is not an enforced virtue: it graces alike the giver and receiver of it. Shylock demands his forfeit, and when Portia asks if Antonio cannot pay, Bassanio offers three times the amount of money. Shylock refuses payment, insisting on the pound of flesh, and to Shylock's delight Portia rules that the bond is legal and that Antonio must prepare for the knife.

Antonio bids farewell to Bassanio and presents himself. Shylock raises the knife. But Portia stops him, pointing out that although a pound of flesh is specified in the bond, there is no mention of blood. She rules that if Shylock sheds one drop of Antonio's blood, all his goods are forfeit to the state and he must die by law. Shylock, stunned, is willing to take the money, which Bassanio again offers, but Portia insists that he shall have only the precise justice he asked for and his pound of flesh. Shylock is about to leave, but Portia invokes another statute: if an alien conspires against the life of a Venetian, half his property is confiscated by his intended victim, the rest by the state, and his life can be spared only by the Duke's pardon.

The Duke is merciful, and when Portia asks Antonio what mercy he can offer Shylock, Antonio says that he will forego his half of Shylock's wealth, if the other half is given to him as a trust to be turned over to Lorenzo and Jessica on Shylock's death. He stipulates further that Shylock become a Christian and that he bequeath his remaining property to Lorenzo. Shylock unhappily accepts the conditions and leaves the court.

Bassanio tries to pay the young lawyer, but Portia will accept no fee except Bassanio's ring. Bassanio refuses, for it is the ring which Portia has given him. Portia starts to leave, but Antonio begs Bassanio to give up the ring, and Bassanio sends Gratiano after the lawyer. Portia receives the ring gratefully but refuses an invitation to dinner. As Nerissa starts for Shylock's house with Gratiano, she whispers to Portia that she will try to get her husband's ring also: the missing rings will provide food for fun at Belmont.

Jessica and Lorenzo are recalling other nights on which fabled lovers have enjoyed the moonlight, when one of Bassanio's servants comes to tell them that Portia is returning, supposedly from the cloister where she has been secluded. Launcelot follows him immediately with word that Bassanio is arriving. Lorenzo sends in to tell the musicians to play a serenade of welcome to their mistress.

Portia and Nerissa, again in their own clothes, linger awhile in the garden listening to the music, then make their presence known to Jessica and Lorenzo. Portia sends Nerissa to warn the servants, and herself enjoins Lorenzo and Jessica not to divulge that they have been away from Belmont. Immediately Bassanio's trumpet is heard, and he comes in with Gratiano and Antonio. He introduces Antonio to Portia who bids him welcome.

Gratiano and Nerissa have begun to quarrel about Gratiano's missing ring, which he swears he gave to a boy, the judge's clerk. Portia blames Gratiano for giving away his wife's keepsake, but Gratiano says that Bassanio is just as guilty, for he gave his ring to the judge. Portia pretends to be very angry with him, relenting only when Antonio seconds Bassanio's oath never to break his word to her again. As a token, Portia gives a ring to Antonio to give to Bassanio, and Bassanio recognizes it as the one he had given to the judge. Portia claims to have got it from the judge, who had shared her bed the night before, and Nerissa says the like of the judge's clerk.

Then Portia gives Bassanio a letter from Bellario, explaining that she was in fact the judge and Nerissa the clerk. She again bids Antonio welcome and gives him a letter, from which he learns that his ships have come safely to harbor, after all. Nerissa gives Lorenzo and Jessica the deed of gift from Shylock, and they all go happily into the house, as the comedy ends.

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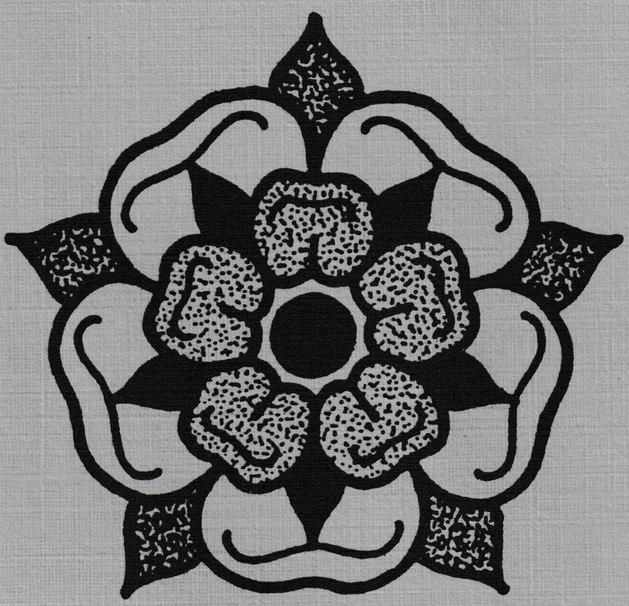
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